

Wearable Play

By

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Abstract

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Wearable Play, a Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition, is comprised of eight sets of wearable jewelry and an interactive installation that were inspired by children's building toys. It is my confluence of being a mother and being an artist. As a result, this exhibition attempts to generate human interaction and to create a platform where people can engage in art. My goal was to create an environment similar to a children's museum, where visitors are invited to play and utilize their imagination. It is a place where the audience can bring their inner child to play. By assembling their own wearable objects, the audience participates in a performance, and their creations become a powerful component of the exhibition.

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”¹

Marcel Proust

Much research has been done in the social sciences regarding balancing a career with raising a family. In particular, women juggling the demands of their work with the needs of their families have been at the forefront of recent sociological and gender studies. Well-known scholar Suzanne, M. Bianchi argues that working mothers have encountered a wide range of challenges to meet their family obligations, especially pertaining to child-rearing.²

However, with new eyes, I have come to believe a woman’s career need not compete with raising her family, but in fact, each can complement the other. Therefore, the theme of my thesis work is about drawing from the family environment: It’s activities, functions, and space to develop new creative ideas. In other words, my family, especially my children has become the inspiration for my work.

The idea for my thesis started as a simple but clear one: I wanted to create a space, similar to a children’s museum, where my children, as well as the rest of my family, could play and engage with my art. Rather than separating my studio life from my domestic life, I sought to combine them. One day, while I was watching my children play with building toys, I realized that each one has an interesting, yet simple, mechanism that worked to connect basic shapes. I saw that multiple pieces could be hooked, clicked, hinged, and pegged, allowing them to be connected together into new more complex forms. Designing building toys requires enormous creativity and imagination, and I regard it as equivalent to what I do when I create my jewelry. Studying

¹ Macel Proust, *La Prisonnière*, the fifth volume of 'Remembrance of Things Past' (Grasset and Gallimard, 1923)

² Suzanne B. Bianchi. et al. *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2007)

my children's toys inspired countless design possibilities, which I began applying to my artwork. Toys like Slinkys, wooden blocks, puzzles, and yoyos became my inspiration for *Wearable Play*.

Wearable Play consists of several sets of works, which I present to the viewer as either complete wearable pieces or, more often, as individual modular parts, like *The Playing Tables*. This piece invites the viewer to interact with multiple puzzle pieces by combining them to create his or her own unique wearables to prominently display on raised clear shelves.

Many of my pieces are also transformed when worn by different people: a child, an adult, or a group. Also, when a piece physically entwines two or more people, it offers an opportunity for them to experience deep emotional connections with one another. This suggests that the very same piece could emit different meanings to different people. The results are virtually endless, with infinite possibilities.

In *Wearable Play* I'm broadening the traditional meaning of jewelry to include more personal associations. My pieces seek to transcend our idea of traditional jewelry and extend its meaning beyond the obvious associations of possession and value. Liesbeth den Besten (2011) stated in *On Jewellery*, "Other than providing the social and religious meaning or status to the wearer, the wearer makes the meaning of piece, attributing stories, memories and their personalities to it."³

It was natural for me to use materials familiar in my home to help me create a bridge between my domestic life and my creative one. Thus, foregoing precious materials, I made most of the works in *Wearable Play* from such everyday materials as wood, plastic, foam, and fabric. These materials are used in children's toys. *Wood Block I* was made with poplar wood, and it was inspired by interchangeable wooden train tracks. Poplar wood is inexpensive, lightweight, takes

³ Liesbeth den Besten, *On Jewellery* (Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011), p. 24

colors beautifully, and is an excellent material to use in non-traditional jewelry. I found another important material in my kitchen. The colorful and textured candy sprinkles I use to make cupcakes became the inspiration for my clear resin jewelry.

To have the functionality of a “toy,” it is crucial that each modular component be precisely crafted, and I spent many hours exploring and testing how the module designs should properly interlock. Even though I was working with simple shapes, intricate mechanical solutions were required for versatile assemblages. To achieve this, I conducted a great deal of both 2D and 3D digital design research and made many prototypes. For example, I designed one of the interlocking modular pieces in *Candy Candy!* in Matrix 3D design software and meticulously milled it in wax to ensure that its measurements would be exact. Then I made a silicone mold from the milled wax object and cast multiple jewelry shapes in resin. (View 1)



I also designed the interlocking pieces of *Foam Puzzles* with Matrix software, and then had the pieces carefully laser cut. In addition, 3D printing and water jet technologies were also utilized to produce repetitive units.

In order to suggest to viewers how such pieces as *Wood Block I* and *Felt Slinky* could be worn, I displayed photographs of people interacting with these pieces. These interactions represent the affection and connection that I love to experience with my family. (View 2)



As previously stated, my goal was to create an environment similar to a children's museum, where visitors are invited to play and utilize their imagination. I applied multi-user friendly and easily accessible characteristics from such museums to generate the viewer's participation. Also I used color to create a safe, warm and playful space - a visually vibrant place that also felt emotionally welcoming. I chose to use pink and blue as the main colors. In *Color Studies* by

Edith Anderson Feisner (2013), pink's connotations are mostly positive: feminine, sweet and babyish. On the other hand, blue is the color of royalty, security, heaven, etc.⁴

In *Wearable Play* I used pink as a sign of hope and positive energy, whereas blue represents a milieu of calming energy and unity. Together these two colors create a calm and secure environment. At the same time, the combination of blue and pink reminds me of the excitement of preparing for my first baby.

The circle is a repetitive shape that I used throughout in the show. It is associated with unity, wholesomeness, and nurturing. The focal point of my exhibition is the *Playing Tables*, which I placed in the center of the gallery space. It consists of four interchangeable five-foot tables that can be assembled into a circular shape. (View 3 and 4)



(View 3)

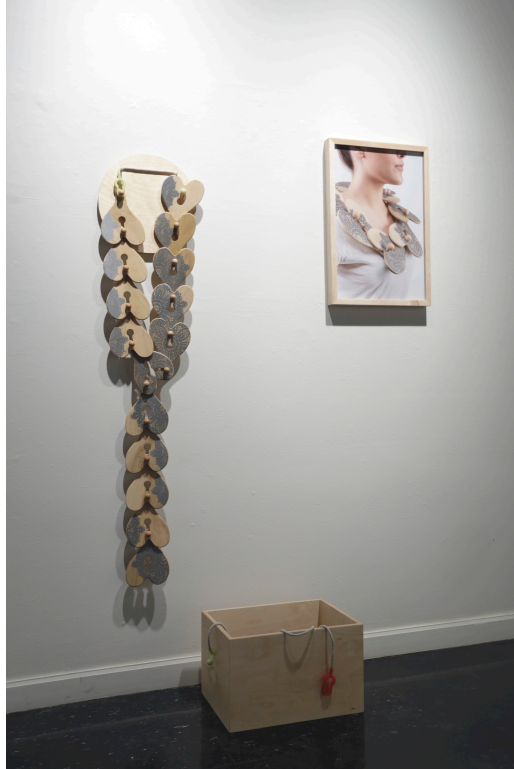
⁴ Edith Anderson Feisner's *Color Studies: Color Symbolism*(Fairchild Books, 2013), p186-187



(View 4)

A vinyl circle was placed on the floor around *Playing Tables*, creating a protective boundary that viewers had to step over in order to play with the small modular pieces scattered on the tables from which they made their own jewelry.

In addition, display elements such as round clear Plexiglas shelves and wooden boxes serve to unify the exhibition. Three works include wooden boxes in *Wearable Play: Wood Block I*, *Wood Block II*, and *Felt Puzzles*. These wooden boxes, which contain individual modular units, play a crucial role in blurring the line between a gallery and a playground. (View 5 and 6)



(View 5)



(View 6)

Even though viewers were only allowed to touch and play around the playing table, they were tantalized by these “toy” boxes, which made them want to physically interact with all the work in the show.

Felt Slinky, made of a collection of multiple strands of felt pieces, where hung between two circle-shaped clear displays. Made in individual lengths ranging from one to eight feet, their various whimsical colors are reminiscent of Hawaiian Leis or birthday banners, both of which have an association with the celebration of life. These pieces could be worn in different ways on a single person or could connect a group of people together, thus evoking feelings of joy, connection and pleasure in the wearers. (View 7)



Wearable Play reflects my prominent roles of mother and artist. In other words, *Wearable Play* is the confluence of being a mother and being an artist. As a result, my work attempts to generate human interaction and to create a platform where people can engage in art. It is also a

place where the audience can bring their inner child to play. The *Playing Table* could rekindle a viewer's childhood artistic sense.

My objective in making, sharing, and enjoying art aligns with Susan Cohn. She (2012) states: "What matters to these makers (contemporary jewelers) was that jewellery be accessible to everyone, regardless of age, gender or class."⁵

Wearable Play is my humble effort to create a space where my family, especially my children could play and engage with my art. At the same time, it explores boundaries between traditional and contemporary jewelry. These works seek to actively engage with any viewer who enters the gallery space. (View 8)



By playfully assembling their own wearable objects, the audience participates in a performance, and their creations become a powerful component of my exhibition. (View 9 and 10)

⁵ Susan Cohn, *Unexpected Pleasure* (Skira Rizzoli, 2012), p.34



(View 9)



(View 10)

Works Cited

Marcel Proust, *La Prisonnière*, the fifth volume of 'Remembrance of Things Past' (Grasset and Gallimard, 1923)

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